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ABSTRACT

A study focused on three graduate students (within a class of six) as they encountered the portfolio process for the first time as learners. Each was asked to complete a learning portfolio as a self-evaluation component for a 14-week graduate reading course. The students determined their goals based on self-assessment, documented their progress based on evidence they selected, and determined their final grade based in standards they co-constructed and evidence they presented. The portfolio component accounted for 70% of their grade. Data included pre/post responses to survey questions regarding self-evaluation, portfolios and rubrics, comments recorded during class discussions and individual conferences, field notes, and items shared by students in class and in their portfolios. Analysis of the portfolios indicated that all three subjects were capable of assessing their knowledge, practice, and habits. They were all capable, sometimes with support, of setting goals which more closely related to their needs as learners. The goals they chose for themselves were often different and the means they chose to document their learning were often different. Findings suggest that all three subjects had contextualized their learning, they participated in the assessment, and they were engaged in a process which showed them how to be independent lifelong learners. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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Portfolios and Rubrics: Teachers' Close Encounters with Self-Evaluation as Learners in Teacher Education Courses

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Portfolios and Rubrics: Teachers' Close Encounters with Self-evaluation as Learners in Teacher Education Courses

> A portfolio...is a portfolio when it provides a comprehensive view of student performance in context... when the student is the participant in rather than the object of assessment... when it provides a forum that encourages students to develop the abilities to become independent, self-directed learners (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 63).

For many different reasons, educators at all levels of education are exploring the use of portfolios (Ohlhausen, Perkins & Jones, 1993). This has extended to teacher education programs where an increasing number of teacher educators are discussing their use of portfolios within their programs (French & Foster, 1992; Mosenthal, Daniels & Merkkelsen, 1992; Ohlhausen & Ford, 1992; Stowell, 1993). While conceptualizations of these portfolios differ, the time has come for teacher educators to practice what we preach (Stahle & Mitchell, 1993) and to encourage students to do as we do (Vogt, McLaughlin, & Rapp Ruddell, 1993).

My Context

I began experimenting with portfolios in 1990. My primary use of portfolios as described in this article is within the context of a graduate course entitled "Whole Language: Issues and Implications." It was during the teaching of the course that I first began using portfolios. I wanted to cover the topic of portfolios and concluded perhaps the best way to cover this content was to involve my students in using portfolios to document their learning. What I discovered was that portfolios were not only an effective way for my students to access the content, but also a way for me to align my assessment with my instructional beliefs. The portfolio was also a successful vehicle for turning over responsibility for learning to the learner. It encouraged students to not only document, but direct their learning. During the 1994 spring semester, a small class roster afforded me an opportunity to look more closely at students as they encountered the portfolio process.

The Process

Like many classroom teachers, teacher educators are not exempt from grading and reporting systems that seem to run contrary to their beliefs (Ohlhausen, Perkins & Jones, 1993; Stowell, 1993). Since I am required to use a single letter grade to represent a student's semester performance, I let that constraint become a focus for initial discussions on assessment. I asked my students whether they operated under similar constraints and how they felt that impacted on their instruction. I also asked students to reflect on how grades impacted on what they did as learners.

Once we acknowledged this preoccupation with grades and how it often influenced what we did as learners and teachers, we shifted our attention to developing a frame for working within this constraint. We examined the concept of rubrics (Routman, 1991) and began to co-construct a rubric to help guide learning in the course. Students identified behaviors they believed constituted "A" level performance in a graduate course. These lists of expectations were compiled. Thirty-nine different behaviors were identified by the six students.

This became the basis for discussions as we worked to reach consensus on a rubric that would be used in the course. Categories of behaviors were suggested until agreement was reached on five behaviors: acquires knowledge inside and outside the classroom, applies what has been learned, shares knowledge with others, empowers and engages self, and displays a positive attitude toward learning. Students agreed on the qualifying labels "consistent" and "inconsistent" to judge the behaviors and that a student must show consistent behavior in four of the five categories to receive an "A" in the course.

The rubric provided a foundation for discussions on how to develop a learning portfolio. In the past, I operated from the assumption many of the teachers with whom I worked had little knowledge about the portfolio process (Johns & VanLeirsburg, 1991). Since then, however, the intense focus on portfolios in the field as an alternative assessment technique (Cramer, 1993; DeFina, 1992; Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991) has caused most students to enter my course with some knowledge of portfolios. My initial discussion shifted from defining what portfolios were to describing different types. Vavrus (1990) described four types of portfolios: moving vans, activity-based, goal-based and reflective. The learning portfolio in this course was intended to be more than just a collection of "stuff" or a collection of activities prescribed by the instructor as some portfolios being described by teacher educators (Stahle & Mitchell, 1993). It was my intent to move students toward the use of a reflective portfolio which Vavrus described as a goal-based portfolio with reflective "captions" attached to each piece of evidence. This encouraged students to think about the portfolio as more of a process than a product.

The process of developing this type of learning portfolio began with self-assessment. Students were asked to reflect on their knowledge of language, their current classroom practices and their personal habits as language users. This examination, with consideration of the rubric behaviors, allowed students to develop personal goals toward which to direct their learning. In class, we began to talk about how a learner could provide evidence that s/he was making progress toward the goals and satisfying the rubric standards. Students identified a number of ways to document their growth and change during the course (reading logs, response journals, samples of children's work, etc.). Following this discussion, students were invited to begin to embark on the process.

The portfolio process worked best when students engaged in ongoing reflection. Students were encouraged to start the process as quickly as possible. I asked students to bring "embryonic" portfolios to class. These in-progress portfolios were shared with partners providing an opportunity for students to assist each other in clarifying the portfolio process. Others have emphasized the importance of this type of ongoing sharing (French & Foster, 1992). I also asked students to write an initial "Dear Reviewer" letter to provide information about the students' goals and plans for documenting progress towards those goals. It allowed me to drop in on the portfolio process and provide individual feedback to students without having to wait to review more fully developed portfolios.

The learning portfolios played an integral role in the class. I wanted to avoid the perception that it was just something extra the

students needed to do (Stowell, 1993). Students learned about alternative forms of assessment by having a first hand experience. It modeled how the line between instruction and assessment could be blurred in their own classrooms. I continued to utilize peer sharing, provided opportunities to ask questions, and conducted mini-lessons as needed. For example, we spent time examining the role of captions. We looked at how some learners used their captions to not only identify their evidence, but also to contextualize it and connect it to their goals to show growth and change. About midterm, I asked them to write a second "Dear Reviewer" letter discussing where they were at in the process. They turned in this with in-progress portfolios allowing me to review what they had done so far. I provided extensive feedback in a "Dear Learner" letter and scheduled conferences to discuss their progress. We talked about how they were doing in regards to their goals and the rubric standards.

Most students were well on their way directing and documenting their own learning. We continued to provide class time for sharing. We discussed issues such as the possibility of changing or dropping goals (concluding since the process is dynamic that this is possible.) As the semester ended, closure was needed. They assembled their evidence, reflected on that evidence and graded the learning which resulted from their participation in the course. The students prepared a final "Dear Reviewer" letter providing a written rationale for their grading decision. It was stressed that the portfolio need to provide evidence supporting the rationale. Students were reminded to use the rubric as a guide in making their grading decision. I met with students individually so they could walk me through their evidence and discuss their grading decisions. Following each conference, I collected the portfolios to provide additional written feedback.

What is important to note is that this type of learning portfolio differs from common conceptualizations of portfolios often used in teacher education programs. This was not a notebook in which students collected and gathered everything they could find, a showcase where they presented their best work, or a collection of predetermined assignments. This portfolio was a way for students to document growth and change that resulted from participation in the course. The students determined their goals based on self-assessment, documented their progress based on evidence they selected, and determined their final grade based on standards they co-constructed and evidence they presented. It was a way of inviting students to take control of their learning. The portfolio was not just another final product that was left with the instructor to be graded. It was the final step of a circular process beginning and ending with self-asessment.

The Study

This study focused on three graduate students (within a class of six) as they encountered the portfolio process for the first time as learners. Each was asked to complete a learning portfolio as a self-evaluation component for a fourteen week graduate reading course. The portfolio component would account for 70% of their grade. (Attendance and participation accounted for 30%.) I wondered what goals they would select to direct their own learning, how they would document that learning, and how they would evaluate their learning in the end. Data were collected on an ongoing basis as the instructor met with the students. A variety of sources were used including pre/post responses

to survey questions regarding self-evaluation, portfolios and rubrics; comments recorded during class discussions and individual conferences; anecdotal information about individual students recorded in a field notebook; and examinations of items shared by students in class and in their portfolios.

The primary data sources for this study were the students' learning portfolios. Each portfolio was carefully reviewed twice during the course: in-progress portfolios at the halfway point and final portfolios following the semester. Close examinations of the portfolios included noting descriptions of the format; kind, quanitity and quality of the evidence; and degree of captioning and/or reflection within the portfolio. I relied primarily on these data to compile brief case studies of each student and to tell the story of how the student moved through the portfolio process. I examined these stories to find commona threads and contrasts between these cases and between my work and the work of other teacher educators.

Dominic

The Plan

Dominic was a veteran secondary teacher who after spending much of his career in technical education was now teaching English. He decided to take this course as his final elective in the masters degree in reading program. Dominic's interest in whole language was two-fold. His primary interest was in "elements of whole language instruction that could be used in the high school classroom as a part of different content areas when the system in the school is not whole language based." In addition, his involvement with graduate work in reading meant that many of his colleagues would ask him to explain what elementary teachers were doing in their whole language classrooms. Dominic wanted to be able to provide articulate responses to these skeptical questions. To document his learning, he identified five tasks: journaling after each class session, collecting practical ideas, writing short reviews of journal articles, bringing materials and ideas to class, and becoming involved with the district reading committee and staff development opportunities. Each task had potential to also provide evidence satisfying the rubric standards.

The Portfolio

Dominic's "Whole Language Portfolio" was contained in a white expandable folder. It contained five separate folders: assessment, application and practice, professional involvement, journal, sharing, and knowledge acquisition/research. The assessment folder primarily contained documents related to self-assessment required throughout the portfolio process (ie, Dear Reviewer Letters, instructor responses, final statement). In the application and practice folder, Dominic included samples of student work to illustrate one significant change in his practice. With his use of the novel Lord of the Flies, he shifted from the use of a discussion-study guide-essay exam format to the use of a reader-response format. He also included materials he collected to set up guidelines for using writer's workshop and thematic instruction in the future. The professional involvement folder contained evidence documenting his activity with the district committee coordinating the language arts program including captioned memos and materials from meetings. In the journal folder, Dominic included his response journal which contained weekly reflections on what he had been reading and thinking related to class issues and

ideas (including responses to his self-selected outside text Nancy Atwell's In the Middle). The sharing folder contained two news articles focused on portfolios he shared in class and an explanation that his sharing was primarily "verbal" and that he had little "contact with materials that [he] could bring to class and share with others." The knowlege folder contained two journal articles with attached reactions and one set of eight related ERIC abstracts "that best represent my own interests and needs" with brief reactions. Each folder contained a letter explaining the evidence that was inside and all of the evidence was captioned with explanations of what it was and how it indicated progress toward his goals.

The Evaluation

Dominic gave himself 63 out of 70 points rating his performance on the lower end of the A range (90%). He acknowledged that his goals had expanded "to include things that I could use in my own classes regardless of the programs used in the school." In his rationale, he directly linked evidence in his portfolio to the all five of the rubric standards. For example, he offered his journal as evidence that he had applied what he had learned (standard #2) and had been consistently engaged throughout the course (standard #4). He indicated when he had been successful at accomplishing his goals and when he fallen short. In describing his research efforts, he admitted that he "did not get as much as this" as he had liked with time and distance interfering with his ability to get access to the library. He concluded that he had "shown consistency in all five areas of the rubric and as a result should receive an A." Dominic observed that portfolios "are the practical way to evaluate whole language/workshop courses...the portfolio guided my learning and directed me to set my own goals" though he admitted that this type of self-evaluation might not be "feasible in the high school."

Belinda

The Plan

Belinda was a veteran first grade teacher in a small rural school. She fully embraced the whole language movement. "I love whole language! It makes so much sense for so many reasons. The more I learn about it and implement it in our classroom, the more sense it makes." Prior to the class, she had taken many steps in moving her practice in that direction. She was taking the class for her own professional development having previously completed a masters degree in reading.

In her initial Dear Reviewer letter, Belinda identified four key goals all related to improving the teaching of skills within her wholelanguage classroom: promoting vocabulary development, teaching sight words, integrating spelling, and integrating phonics. She planned to address those issues by developing two "whole language units" one on the environment and the other on fairy tales. She also wanted to set up a writer's workshop program in her room. Within these changes, she also would add the use of portfolios and self-assessment techniques. Belinda outlined her potential evidence to include unit lesson plans, teacher observations, tape recordings of oral readings, videotaping of projects, and samples of student work.

Following some initial feedback, Belinda altered her plan. She added the implementations of portfolios and student self-assessment techniques as separate goals. She outlined a procedure for developing portfolios that made it independent of her unit planning goal. She

combined her four goals related to skill instruction into one goal. She dropped the idea of developing a fairy tale unit and the setting up of writer's workshop. By midterm, Belinda had focused her goals on unit planning, spelling and phonics instruction, and portfolios and self-assessment.

The Portfolio

The "Portfolio of Belinda" arrived in a three-ring notebook decorated with a cow -- a favorite symbol of Belinda, so it was not surprising to see one on her portfolio. Three sample books that had been created by her students were handed in separately. Her portfolio was organized into eleven sections. The first section "Reflections" contained the self-evaluation documents required as a part of the portfolio process. Section two "Whole Language" contained a statement of her beliefs about whole language. Section three, four and five contained evidence of three related theme units she had implemented during the course: the environment, rain forest and endangered animals. Each section presented evidence that included the unit plan, plans/activities for addressing spelling within the unit, materials used during the unit, samples of home involvement activities, plans for math and science connections, and examples of completed student work. Section six and seven looked at spelling and phonics within her first grade program. Each section began with a synthesis statement and included samples of things used in her instruction. Belinda also included outside resources (for example, four bibliographies of materials) that she had collected. Section eight was focused on portfolios. It also began with a synthesis statement and included three sample student portfolios from her classroom. Section nine looked at assessment in general and included an overview statement as well as fourteen different assessment forms (reading and writing logs, self-evaluations, etc.) she had created to use in her classroom. Section ten looked at her use of writers workshop and included an overview statement and a description of her writing program. The final section contained 11 double-sided pages of photographs showing aspects of her classroom environment and instructional program.

It was apparent in reviewing Belinda's portfolio that she had put forth tremendous effort in documenting what she did in her classroom. Each section began with overview statements providing evidence she had been reading and thinking about each topic. She synthesized the ideas of others and modified them for her classroom. Individual pieces of evidence, however, were usually not captioned. Because of this, it was more difficult to get a sense of how the evidence she had assembled constituted growth and change. It was difficult to separate what she had been doing before the class from what she was doing differently because of the class.

The Evaluation

"I think my grade for this class should be an A! I have learned an A worth of stuff from you, my research and others in the class." Obviously Belinda was pleased with the outcomes from her participation in this class. Her rationale supporting her grading decision began with an examination of her personal goals. She identified changes in her phonics and spelling programs and the addition of portfolios and self-assessment as her greatest changes. She described the impact of those changes on her students -- better engagement, more confidence, greater self-awareness, and growth as readers and writers. Belinda

also looked at the rubric to further support her evaluation decision.

> "I feel that I have been consistent in our class rubric ...I am applying that knowledge daily which is a way of empowering and engaging myself. I have tried to share some of my experiences and have brought in information to share...and I always see myself as an individual with a positive attitude."

In the end she had gone beyond the goals she had set for herself (even reembracing the goal of implementing writers' workshop), documented efforts in each area and used that to support her self-evaluation decision.

Belinda overtly voiced her positive feelings about the portfolio process. "Because of our discussions, I have examined my beliefs and have done much self-assessment...I never had a class that has made me do more thinking." This belief in self-assessment translated to classroom practice with the addition of portfolios and the inclusion of self-assessment techniques in her whole language classroom.

Bonnie

The Plan

Since Bonnie was a recent graduate of our teacher education program, this was the second time I had worked with her. She had been teaching a third/fourth combination class at a Christian school for two years. She admitted that she usually goes "by the book" using teacher texts for most of her subject areas. Bonnie's initial steps toward whole language included eliminating her English textbook and substituting a her own creative writing program. She had just begun to use tradebooks in her reading instruction and she had made some initial steps toward integration through the use of a mini-unit on sandwiches. She acknowledged that she wasn't sure "this was really meaningful, but the class loved it." She had just completed a space theme with a "looser" organization "but only in a limited way." Bonnie was interested in moving further along on the continuum.

In her initial Dear Reviewer letter, Bonnie wanted to center her instruction (and her focus in this course) on "teaching theme units across the curriculum." She wanted to be able "to implement practical ideas learned from this course" in her classroom. She identified issues related to motivating students through choice and active involvement as issues she wanted to explore. She also wanted to be able to share this information with other teachers in her school interested in whole language. Bonnie commented that she would track progress toward these goals by maintaining an ongoing journal with samples of items to substantiate entries. Since her initial letter did not include specific goals, Bonnie later defined her expected outcomes generally as implementing practical ideas from this course in her classroom, gaining knowledge to share with other educators in her school and reevaluating her educational philosophies. She saw these goals as compatible with the rubric behaviors.

The Portfolio

Bonnie's portfolio came in a very large brown artist's folder. It contained a pocket folder as well as a number of separate items all captioned and placed loosely in the folder. To document her change, Bonnie included copies of her new and old schedules to show she had combined reading and writing into one integrated block; a survey she developed (based on an idea from Regie Routman's Invitations) she

could use with students to learn more about them; samples from students' reading logs added to her choice reading time program to increase accountability and self-awareness; examples of students' work from the endangered animal theme where she had turned over some control; and a copy of a parent letter describing a theme project which would be graded according to a scale developed by the students.

The heart of Bonnie's portfolio was the pocket folder containing her self-assessments from the portfolio process and her response journal. Entries in the twenty-one page response journal were organized around the rubric standards. Each entry was labeled according to the standard for which it was providing evidence. For example in one entry she examined herself as a reader following an assigned reading about defining good readers and labeled the entry as evidence that she was satisfying goal number four -- engaging self and examining personal habits. An entry describing how she allowed her students to design a new classroom arrangment was labeled "Goal 2: Applying what has been learned." Though the entry described what she did, it did not discuss how this project connected to something she had learned. In general, however, in reviewing her entries, she did provide evidence that she was reading and thinking about issues and ideas related to class and that she was attempting changes in her classroom. Her endangered animals unit not only included a greater degree of student choice and control, but also culminated in a social action project. The students decided to make and sell buttons to raise funds to donate to environmental organizations and prior to donating those funds they investigated each of the organizations to discover how they used their funds. This seemed a significant step forward from her initial step into integration with her sandwich mini-unit.

The Evaluation

Bonnie addressed each of the rubric standards in supporting her self-evaluation decision. She pointed out that what she had read indicated that she had consistently acquired new knowledge. That she had applied this knowledge in a variety of classroom changes including her endangered animals unit, word wall, improved scheduled, survey for next year, orders for new tradebooks and plans for next fall. (She identified three very specific future goals: developing her Wisconsin History unit as literature-based and student interest- driven, planning one theme per month in her classroom, and setting up an observation binder on her students.) She had shared her knowledge with others including her principal and other teachers. She related that her principal "was concerned about themes for the classroom until I could show her that they fit into our curriculum goals." The principal videotaped the class "and could really see the learning going on as students wrote and commented on what they were reading." Her third grade colleague also implemented ideas Bonnie had shared from class such as a reading log and reading/writing rubrics. Bonnie did admit, however, that she was not sure that she "always had a positive attitude toward everything I had read or found out about whole language, but I did learn and it did stretched my brain." She also looked at her personal goal of expanding her use of thematic instruction and concluded that "she felt more confident about setting up themes for next year based on what I learned in this course" listing some possible themes to research during the summer. In looking at her learning, Bonnie rated her performance an A (66 out of 70

points.) She noted that "as always, the more I learned, the more I realized how much I need to continue to learning."

Common Threads and Contrasting Colors

What was apparent in telling these stories was that all three were capable of assessing their knowledge, practice and habits. They were all capable, sometimes with support, of setting goals which more closely related to their needs as learners. They were all capable, sometimes with guidance, to document their own growth and change. And they were all capable of providing evidence to support their self-evaluation decisions. Within a supportive environment, they were able to direct and document their own learning.

What was also very apparent was that the goals they chose for themselves were often different. Even when their goals were similar (both Bonnie and Belinda focused on thematic instruction), their previous experiences and present contexts often cause their paths of inquiry to be different. As Stowell (1993) concluded: "In any profession, each individual brings his or her own particular expertise to each event (p. 14)."

Likewise, the means that they chose to document their learning were often different. While certain types of evidence were seen in all portfolios (samples of student work to show changes in practice), other evidence such as the photojournal seemed more appropriate to illustrate specific goals for only one individual. This was similar to likenesses and differences that French and Foster (1992) found in their analysis of clinical portfolios maintained by teachers in a reading center. Even when the sections of the portfolio were teacher-determined and the teacher educators professed a belief in providing graduate students with a structure, contents of portfolios still varied from learner to learner. Mosenthal, Daniels and Mekkelson (1992) suggested that activity assignments along side the requirement of completing a portfolio often place a constraint on learners as they develop their portfolios failing to discover what they called "authorship." But in these cases, that constraint was not present and students were more able to assume authorship of their portfolio. Unlike traditional assessment measures that expect a standardized response, this process seemed to allow learners to document growth and change in a way that reflected who they were as individuals. This potential for personalizing assessment is arguably one of the most significant advantages of this process (Ohlhausen & Ford, 1992).

In the end, they all saw themselves as "A" learners and in my experience almost all do. Stowell (1993) discussed that even when the teacher educators held on to the portfolio grading decision, uniformly high grades resulted. Some have suggested that high grades may be related to the clear identification of outcomes at the beginning of the semester and/or the constant monitoring of the learning process (Vogt, McLaughlin & Rapp Ruddell, 1993). The rubric which was a frame for Dominic and Bonnie's grading decisions provided a clear set of expectations. For Belinda, the rubric seemed less important than her personal goals in justifying her grading decision; but like the rubric, her goals also provided a clear set of expectations.

Some have questioned whether the process provides enough rigor to distinguish between surface and substance (Ohlhausen, Perkins & Jones, 1993); however in a study comparing distributions of grades prior to the use of portfolios with grades based on the use of portfolios,

Vogt, McLauglin and Rapp Ruddell (1993) concluded that distributions were "highly similar to patterns established with traditional grading practices (p.9)." They concluded that "the validity of the portfolio process does not appear to be as problematic (p. 11)." In that study, the teacher educator maintained control over the grading process. In my cases, self-evaluation drove the grading process. I could only speculate whether Dominic, Belinda and Bonnie would have received similar grades if I had used more traditional measures. Perhaps the only reason teacher educators examine that question is because of the constraints we work within. It assumes validity in traditional grading practices. I believe I know more about what these learners had learned by reviewing what they had done in the portfolio process than I would have learned by reviewing traditional measures. In the end, I could conclude that they all had contextualized their learning, they participated in the assessment, and they were engaged in a process which showed them how to be independent lifelong learners.

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